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CAN AN EFFICIENT THEOLOGY BE DEPENDENT UPON HISTORICAL FACTS?

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The biblical critics are responsible for a growing interest in this question. It is true that Lessing long ago formulated it in Germany and answered it in a tremendous and startling negative. He declared that eternal truths of reason could not be dependent upon accidental truths of history.¹ But the reaction from rationalism and the new understanding and valuation of history, which the doctrine of evolution necessitated, demonstrated that Lessing's "eternal truths of reason" were themselves in large part formulations of the historical experience of men. Perhaps never have men turned so eagerly to historical research for guidance in religion and theology as in the 135 years since those words were written. Not only Schleiermacher and Ritschl but the age in which they lived turned from the mists of philosophy and the strainings of Hegelianism to the facts of history with the relief which men experience who come on solid rock beneath the sand. It is no philosophical skepticism which in our time has led men to formulate once more the question of our paper and to incline them once more to take their stand with Lessing. But as the biblical critics have tested the rock of gospel history with their pickaxes and their modern

¹ *Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft*, 1777.

chemicals, it has chipped off and crumbled away to such an extent that men are beginning to wonder if it were not

. . . . better far to mark off thus much air,
And call it heaven; place bliss and glory there;
Fix perfect homes in the unsubstantial sky,
And say, what is not, will be by-and-by,

than to attempt to come upon historical facts solid and secure enough to allow us to build our theology upon them. No theology can be efficient—on this I think we are all agreed—unless it presents in succinct and comprehensible form the leading tenets of present religious faith. And is it not true that many of us are beginning to doubt the necessary connection between present religious faith and, say, the ultimate findings of criticism on the Synoptic Gospels?

As biblical criticism has proceeded in its task of historical excavation it has uncovered such a complex of problems that it seems almost impossible ever to expect to arrive at any unanimous opinion on even the most important matters. We are inclined to be more and more confident that any theology that is dependent upon the results and processes of biblical criticism is doomed to a limited clientèle and to an unlimited revision. We should be obliged to rebuild the foundations of faith, or at least to be ready to rebuild them, with every fresh issue of the *Theologische Literatur-Zeitung*.

And yet as we consider the matter further, we easily perceive how important the question is which our impatience with the slow progress of biblical criticism has pressed upon us. For the aim of historical and literary criticism of the Bible is to disentangle the factual from the mythical. Confining our attention to the most important subject of biblical criticism, we all of us are clear-sighted enough to see that the criticism of the gospels is primarily concerned with the delimitation of the principal figure which those gospels portray. Now this figure is none other than Jesus Christ, the Founder of the Christian religion. There are few men who would be prepared to say that a Christian theology which is not dependent upon Jesus Christ would be an efficient theology. In all ages of the church until now the author of the Fourth Gospel has not been regarded as too presumptuous in asserting: "These

things are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that believing, ye might have life in his name." The belief that Jesus is the Son of God has been regarded as fundamental in Christian theology and this belief has been regarded as dependent upon what has been written of him and suggested about him by the gospels. Until recently the truth of the facts there narrated concerning him has been usually taken for granted and has not been subject to debate, but the faith of the Christian church has been dependent upon the belief that the elementary and outstanding facts of the gospels are true. Critical scholarship is an inquiry into the historical truth of these facts. These facts have been called into question; they must either be examined or dismissed from serious notice. So whatever we may think concerning the methods and outlook of the criticism of the gospels, we must confess that this criticism has brought us face to face with a most important religious problem which underlies it; this namely: Can an efficient theology have any vital dependence upon historical facts?

It seems to the writer that this question ought not to receive its final answer until we have thoroughly considered the place of Jesus Christ in our Christian faith. This is of course only a part of the larger problem of the relation of human personalities to religious faith, but that lies altogether beyond the horizon of this paper. It is its purpose simply to raise some considerations concerning the place of Christ in our own faith and, therefore, the place of historical facts in our own theology.

In the first place, we ought to be absolutely sure that the supreme fact in the spiritual life of the Christian is not Jesus but the conscience. Jesus was not the author of morality and religion among men, whatever else he was author of. The Ten Commandments and the Twenty-third Psalm antedate him. Had Jesus never lived, we should be both moral and religious—simply because we are men. In ethical religions, religion may be defined, I think, as the attitude of men toward the power implicit in conscience. Should we be asked for our ultimate connotation of God we should not say that he was the Maker of heaven and earth nor that he was the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ but rather that

he was the Power behind our own conscience. Before Jesus was born, men had obeyed their consciences and so entered the moral realm; they had reacted upon their consciences and so re-entered the religious realm. Jesus does not create faith in, and reverence for, our consciences. Our reverence for our consciences creates faith in Jesus. Jesus is not the Lord of our conscience; he is Lord because of our conscience.

This or something similar to this may have been in Jesus' mind when he replied to the young man who called him "good Master": "Why callest thou me good? There is only one that is good, namely God." To a man who has really bowed before the sublimity of conscience, Martineau's words become luminous: "Between soul and soul, even the greatest and the least, there can be, in the things of righteousness and love, no lordship and servitude, but the sublime sympathy of a joint worship on the several steps of a never-ending ascent."¹ It is true that the recent researches into the origin of conscience have softened somewhat her categorical imperatives but her final answer seems to be: "Constitute me, as you will, but obey me." Men who refuse are being shut out from the most exalted human experiences. There is no other guide to them. A man who has not hearkened to his conscience can understand neither the significance of Jesus nor his own need of him. Men are moral and religious, not because they are Mohammedans or Christians or pagans, but simply because they are men.

Now in the New Testament it is nowhere said that Jesus is the author either of our conscience or of our religion; it is, however, said that he is "the author of our faith." This is not the place to enter anew upon the grounds for believing that Jesus was really the founder of the Christian faith. It is only necessary to keep in mind that, historically speaking, men entered upon a new religious epoch with his advent. To be a Christian means to identify the Power behind conscience with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of the life and character of Jesus of Nazareth, we believe in his God. And that means of course that we believe that the purposes of God and Jesus and our consciences are the same. From this it follows that we obey conscience with

¹ *Seat of Authority in Religion*, 5th ed., p. 391.

thanksgiving and with sympathy. We had been groping in the dark, pushed forward willy-nilly by conscience. Through Jesus we have come out of the long tunnel. We now know where conscience leads us and what she would make out of us. The Christian confession of faith, much older than any of our church creeds, is, "No one knoweth the Father but the Son and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him." We have come unto him and he hath given us rest. Through the matchless might of Jesus we believe that the severest dictate of conscience is the Father seeing us a great way off, running to fall on our neck and kiss us.

What, then, has our belief in the reality of the historic Jesus brought us in the holy realm of our religious life? At least two things, it seems to me. First, a sudden illumination concerning the meaning of conscience, its imperatives, the joy of obeying it, and the horror that follows on disobeying it. Whatever it decrees for us, however sharp the tone in which these decrees are uttered, it is a Father who speaks and whose constant speaking is a sign of his forgiving patience. It is the actual and marvelous historic truth that, because of two or three years in the life of Jesus over a thousand years ago in a remote corner of the earth, a vast multitude, whom no man can number, have been granted a triumphant joy in following out instincts which have run counter to the fiercest impulses of the flesh. The witness of his absolutely unique life and achievements has transformed the lives of earth's most eminent and most outcast men. His character has been for thousands the proof of his faith and the creator of theirs.

But he has done even more than this. He has not only given men power to obey the law of the mind which had become weak through the flesh, but he has to a great extent rewritten that law of the mind. He has not only been the executive of our spirits to get the laws of our consciences enacted, he has become the supreme court to determine the legality of the dictates of conscience, yea, he has even entered upon the functions of the legislator and gone so far as to get "new commandments" legally and irrevocably enacted. For when men became convinced that Jesus represented the Power behind conscience, conscience gradually became so accustomed to turn to him for reinforcement that it

also turned to him for guidance. The new commandment that we love one another, that we live not to be served but to serve, began to be the most insistent and most sacred of all the commandments. And so it has come to pass that Jesus of Nazareth has taken his seat within the spirits of a vast portion of the human race. One of the commonest phrases in the world is "a Christian conscience." It is actually true that our most inward and secret monitor speaks to each one of us in the accents and in the words of Jesus of Nazareth; in collecting and pressing home upon us the highest experiences of the human race it has permitted what that One Man has said and done completely to engulf and overshadow the experience of all other human creatures beside.

If this is a true account of the influence of Jesus upon our religious and moral life, and if theology be simply an ordered statement of that life, shall we say that it may really be efficient if it disregard the question of the existence and character of Jesus?

The attempt to disregard this question comes in our time chiefly from the friends of religion. This curious contention has arisen not so much from the desire to revolutionize the form of theology as to conserve its content. The application of the principles of literary and historical criticism to the gospels has made uncertain which of the deeds attributed to Jesus he actually performed and which of the words ascribed to him he actually spoke. So great indeed has been the uncertainty that by a kind of psychological necessity it has led some men to doubt his historic reality.¹ With this doubt to face for the first time and quite bewildered by the state of New Testament criticism in general, earnest Christian men have endeavored to move our faith from the sands of history to the rock of experience and to affirm that Christianity's chief cornerstone is not Jesus Christ but rather the experience of men with a figure labeled with his name.

Now, of course, nothing is more historically certain than the existence of Jesus. But the recent discussion concerning his historicity has revealed the fact that it is not a mathematical nor a philosophical but a historical truth. Philosophically speaking, therefore, the fact of Jesus belongs not in the category of certainties

¹ Cf. Shirley J. Case, *The Historicity of Jesus*, chap. i.

but rather in that of probabilities. We may be thoroughly convinced that he lived and that he was crowned with thorns without and bathed in peace within, but because we receive it upon the testimony of others and because it belongs in the realm of historical incidents, the fact of Jesus cannot be scientifically, or rather mathematically, demonstrated and cannot therefore we are told be indispensable to our religious life.

To meet this real difficulty, Professor Wobbermin of Breslau, who not long ago delivered the Taylor Lectures at Yale, has made an interesting distinction between *Geschichte* and *Historie*. Though throughout his long brochure¹ he has neglected to define his terms, and though I think of no precise English equivalents which can symbolize his conceptions clearly, we shall not depart very far from his thought if by *Geschichte* we understand the immediate impression of "Jesus" on the present and by *Historie* the actual fact of his existence and the actual facts of his career in the past. He maintains cogently that whatever was the factual truth about Jesus, there is no gainsaying the historic truth that his figure has laid hold of the spiritual life of men for generations and that it lays hold of it today. He therefore believes that whatever we believe about the facts of his life or even about the fact of his existence, we shall not be able to extirpate the abiding and transforming might of his personal portrait in the New Testament. Wobbermin's brochure reminds us of Harnack's words of seventeen years ago:

There is a difference between fact and fact. The single outer facts are uncertain; so far Lessing was perfectly right in warning us against uniting accidental historical truths with the most essential truths and in hanging the entire weight of eternity on a spider web. But the spiritual content of an entire life is also a historical fact and it has its certainty in the effect which it produces.²

Wobbermin's contention, however, goes beyond Harnack's. Harnack postulates that there was an "entire life" lived; Wobbermin declares that whether that life was lived or not, there remains the impression of the picture of Christ in our consciousness, something in the present and not in the past, something as certain as

¹ *Geschichte und Historie in der Religionswissenschaft*, 1911.

² *Das Christentum und die Geschichte* (1895), p. 18.

our own existence, something indeed which enters into and conditions our own existence. Now there can be no doubt that this statement is true; the only unanswerable question is whether it would remain true a generation, say, after the fact of Christ's existence and character was left problematical. Laymen have assured me that whether the New Testament should be proven to be false to historic fact or not, their faith would remain the same. But they have always said it to me alone or in a whisper behind a sheltering hand at the close of a church service. The tremendous and the exalting influence of the gospels has been achieved because, or at least while, men have believed in the truth of the outstanding facts therein narrated. It can hardly be doubted that if the gospels should come to be regarded as a unique specimen of imaginative writing their influence would be of a different kind. The possibilities of faith in the realm of actual life, the obligations of loyalty and of gratitude, the actual revelation of God in human history would all be regarded differently. That being the case, our faith and our theology would be different. They might be more translucent, or they might be more vague and ineffective, but they would be different. That is to say, theology depends upon historical facts, and, so far forth, on biblical criticism.

Probably most of us would be inclined to agree with Professor Troeltsch, who says that for a church and a liturgy and a worship and a brotherhood the belief in a historic Jesus is imperative. He believes that the church must examine into the question of his existence and character, that it must deliver its case to its specialists, and that it need have no fear as to the outcome.¹ For after all, there is a distinct and historic accomplishment at the basis of the Christian religion. It has not professed to be a search after God but rather a finding of him. Its characteristic is not a great longing but rather a deep joy in a vast discovery. Its distinguishing mark is not its hunger after righteousness but its vision of God in Christ. It seems absurd to sacrifice this inheritance because an erratic group of critics has brought into the dim horizon of

¹ *Die Bedeutung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu für den Glauben* (1911), particularly pp. 41, 51.

thought the possibility that the gospels are completely mythological in character. But this sacrifice men like Wobbermin are preparing to make, chiefly upon two grounds. They raise two serious objections to making Christian faith and therefore Christian theology dependent upon historical facts: first, that faith would then be dependent not merely upon science, but upon a particular branch of a particular science, viz., upon biblical historical criticism; and, second, that, even granted that this science could prove the *historic* truth of the existence and exalted character of Jesus, we should never be able to advance beyond the region of the probable in our moral and spiritual life. These objections are most serious; are they as insuperable as they seem?

The second of these objections is the more serious of the two; let us consider it first. There can be no doubt that if biblical science should prove that, according to all historical canons, Jesus of Nazareth is a real historical figure, living in the first century of our era, he would thereby be no more certain of existence than many another historical character. And our objectors rightly affirm that the existence of any historic character can never be said to be philosophically certain. We are bound to believe in the existence of Washington or Lincoln or Caesar on the testimony of others from a more or less remote past. We do right to regard historic proof as establishing in many cases the highest conceivable historic probability of their existence, but no matter how high that probability may be, it is still but a probability. Now a probability, our objectors assert, is not sufficient foundation for religious faith. Religious faith and religious action must be founded on nothing less than certainty. Conscience speaks in categorical terms, and whatever has to do with conscience, with morality, with religion, or with religious faith must have behind it something stronger than probability, no matter how high that probability must be. If religion and conscience are based upon the probable, they must speak to us of advantage and likelihood rather than of duty. The "ought" must become the "would be better." The objectors who thus strongly press their objection usually overlook the distinction between conscience and religion on the one side and religious faith on the other, of which we spoke at the outset. Christian believers

do not ground their conscience on Jesus of Nazareth, nor their religion, which is predominantly a reaction, upon conscience. Conscience must speak categorically or not at all. But our objectors err at a more important point than this. They overlook the fact that the conscience of most of us promulgates this principle of moral action: "Thou oughtest to act in accordance with the highest probability." This simple declaration of conscience enables it to annex vast areas of the probable which are concerned after all in nearly every moral action. There can be nothing certain to us beyond the fact of our own existence. No matter what sense and reason tell us about the existence of nature and friends, we cannot go even here beyond the highest conceivable probability. Without faith, we are obliged to remain within the deadly confines of solepsism. The moment, therefore, that we become convinced of the highest probability of the existence of Jesus, that moment conscience accepts the obligation of living as though Jesus existed and not as though he did not. As soon, therefore, as we believe that Jesus as he is portrayed in his essential character in the gospels really existed, we have the moral right of becoming his disciples and worshipers of his Father.

Relieved of this bugbear, the objection remains that if the historic Jesus is to be the basis of our religious life (let us rather say, of our religious faith), we are bound to be dependent, for a very important function of our lives, upon a small group of students whose business it is to examine the reliability of the records of his earthly life. The intolerableness of this situation will, I suppose, never be expressed better than by Principal Shairp:

I have a life with Christ to live,
 But, ere I live it, must I wait
 Till learning can clear answer give
 Of this and that book's date?
 I have a life in Christ to live,
 I have a death in Christ to die;
 And must I wait, till science give
 All doubts a full reply?

But, although it is undoubtedly true that biblical critics have a most important function in our religious life, as preachers and

parents and poets and natural scientists also have, the objection is not as fatal as it seems. For it is true not only that faith makes history and is caused by history but that within certain limits faith is a judge and an establisher of history. Long before the historical questions of the gospels are settled, usually before they are raised, we are brought into contact with the New Testament and with the figure of Jesus there portrayed. As Wobbermin and many other writers insist, the impression that that figure makes upon us is ineffaceable. Our conscience holds us before it, even after certain historical doubts concerning it arise. There can, however, be little doubt that the impression that figure has made upon us was made upon us while we took its historicity for granted. There can be no doubt at all that the Christian inheritance upon which our conscience is dependent was gathered under a similar impression of the historicity of Christ. We are overpowered by the picture of Christ in the gospels—so overpowered, our life moves toward eternal meanings and is enriched by eternal motives. We are then asked to reckon with the idea that this picture of Christ is not the picture of an actual life but the mere collocation of fancies and incidents, an ingenious or accidental putting-together of dreams and ideals; which therefore lose their vital and compelling and personal power. It is at this point that faith enters the domain of historical research. It does not enter altogether ignorant. It is aware that historical criticism gives an almost unanimous verdict in favor of the historic existence of Jesus of Nazareth. But it enters for itself. It does not employ itself with dates or historic environment. It says: "I believe that that picture is a whole and not a collection. I believe that it is a transcript of life that we have in the gospels and not the expression of longing after it. I believe that our ideals derive themselves from that actual life and not that our actual lives are distorting themselves in trying for an 'impossible ideal.'" And so we are not left to the small group of professional historical critics. We all instinctively feel with Harnack, perhaps the greatest of historical critics, that the life of Jesus "has its certainty in the effect which it produces." To that extent we are all historical critics. The science of history is not remote from human life. Just as a man's

senses confirm the findings of the scientist so a man's spiritual sense confirms the findings, yes even assists in the findings, of the historian. It is simply not true to say that it is the small group of professional critics who become the custodians of faith, if we make room for a historic figure in its sacred realm. Christian theology must ever indeed be dependent upon historical criticism, but the possession of faith in the figure of Jesus entitles one to a place among the historical critics.

In conclusion, we take up once more the question we put at the outset: Can a theology which is dependent upon historical facts be an efficient theology? And we make this partial but unhesitating answer, viz.: A theology which is independent of historical facts is bound to be inefficient because it is bound to be independent of the historic Jesus. And as we reflect upon this answer, we discover that, though we have not entered into the question of detail nor attempted to define the boundaries of the dependence of Christian theology on historical facts and historical criticism, we have answered the question at the head of this paper in the affirmative.